

GRADE 2 BODHRÁN TUTOR & CD

Fergal O'Brien and René de Kat, Traditional Arts Partnership, Ring of Gullion, A4, 38 pages and 26 track CD, Price £20, www.bodhrangradetutor.com.

Photo: Shanroe Photography



Fergal O'Brien teaches bodhrán in Mullaghbawn, and this publication was inspired by thirteen bodhrán candidates from the Traditional Arts Partnership based in the Ring of Gullion, who took part in the first ever London College of Music (LCM) bodhrán exams in St Mary's Primary Mullaghbawn in 2016. They all achieved distinctions across grades 2, 4, 6 and 8.

Here Fergal has developed a simple tutorial book and CD for the novice bodhrán player. The work's simplicity is the real strength of this course; he notates the tunes and describes the underlying rhythm of selected melodies, which include a well-known jig, reel, polka, hornpipe and barndance. There is a clear explanation of the 2016-2020 Grade 2 syllabus, the package addressing the needs of the LCM examination, but you can easily use this as a stand-alone tutorial book.

Starting right is the key to any endeavour and no more so than in Traditional music. Melody is the dominant force in traditional music;

So how do you make a bodhrán sound traditional? The answer is simple, really simple, you listen, you listen to traditional music. Fergal's course does not set out to turn you into a John Joe Kelly, although John Joe did launch the book last November. The publication will help your understanding of how the frame drum works in traditional music, so stick at it, one day you may reach the sophistication of John Joe.

The book is spiral bound, which means it lies flat on the table or music stand and the print is from the Comic Sans family of fonts, a teacher's favourite for its legibility. The bodhrán beats are notated in two different ways, a simple graphical representation with up and down orange arrows indicating the beater's direction. Secondly there are arrows written below standard stave notation, with emboldening to show the emphasis on the beat. The latter notation was developed by René De Kat, who also teaches bodhrán with the Traditional Arts Partnership in South Armagh.

“A good bodhrán player follows the contours of the tune, and this is what Fergal's course teaches”

historically the music evolved from solo playing, due partly to the scarcity of instruments and also the economic necessity of being the only fiddler at the wake. Today a good session happens when there is a seamless playing of tunes, we recognise this as being the bedrock of the tradition. Melody drives the rhythm (listeners tap their feet, beat time with a coin on the table top or nod their heads). It's a fact well worth repeating; in Irish music melody drives the rhythm. It is where the bodhrán at its most fundamental diverges from other drums.

Popular music is dominated by common time, its 4/4 beat established by a drum kit, a melodic progression is written over that and the melody is used to carry the song. Traditional music, in many ways works in the opposite direction; it begins with a melody and for raw-bar traditional music it can stop right there. If traditional music becomes tied down to the metronomic beat of a drummer, it doesn't sound authentic at all. A good bodhrán player will follow the contours of the tune, and this is what Fergal's course teaches.

The CD has 26 tracks, arranged in groups of three; they begin with a set of words, the syllables matching the beat of the tune. This is followed by the melody on the whistle and finally the melody with bodhrán accompaniment from Fergal. Fergal says, “The purpose of this book is not to create a beginner guide to the bodhrán, as there are already a number of good guides and accompanying CDs. It is about sharing tunes and knowledge.” He understands the praxis of managed learning; good teachers don't showboat their mastery, they show what is possible when the lesson is followed. Fergal, Alana Flynn and René are excellent teachers, no wonder those first pupils all gained distinctions. Not only is this package a well thought out introduction to bodhrán playing, it would be well worth investing in if you're running a slow session or starting to work out accompaniment on guitar or bouzouki. A good night of traditional music has to have good foundations. Fergal O'Brien's course is built on solid ground, moreover, his method is one that works.

Seán Laffey